

Essential Questions: Tips for Writing and Revising¹

Reminders:

- Essential Questions Should. . .
 - be about quality and require students to make judgments
 - matter to students NOW and in the FUTURE
 - connect to students' lives
 - get at “the heart of the matter” (for the topic, text, discipline, etc.)
 - possess emotive force, intellectual bite or edginess
 - be open-ended, possible to contend, arguable
 - be linked to data (there are available resources to use in pursuit of answers)
 - be concise and clearly stated

Tips for Generating Questions:

- Put Standards into Question Forms
- Identify “Big Ideas” of Unit, Concept or Discipline and Turn Into Questions
- Reframe a Required Text, Topic or Standard by Focusing on Why it Matters
- Consider: What Questions Drive the Discipline? What Problems Inform Current Research?
- Consider the Heart of the Matter: What is the true importance of this curricular topic? Why do you love teaching it?
- Look Around the Community for Issues that Intersect With the Topic
- Ask Ethical/Moral Questions--what should we pursue? What should we do with the knowledge we have?

Model Essential Questions:

- Social problems/health
 - What is waste and its effects?
 - Who is hungry and what are the effects?
 - What does it mean to be healthy?
- Cultural Issues:
 - Is sports overemphasized in American culture?
- Language Arts:
 - What is courage? What is a good relationship?
 - How gets power and why?
- Physics:
 - Where do waves come from?

¹Adapted from *Engaging Readers and Writers With Inquiry* by Jeffred Wilhelm and *Understanding by Design* by Wiggins and McTighe Jess Westhoff, Boise State Writing Project

- Biology:
 - Why do organisms die?
 - Is sex necessary?
- History/Cultural Values
 - Who was/is a great person
 - What is worth fighting for? Are wars necessary?
 - Is U.S. history a history of progress?
- Government
 - Is government necessary?
 - Can liberty and security be balanced?
 - Who gets power and why?
 - What is a good government?
- Math
 - Was geometry discovered or invented?
 - Is everything quantifiable?
 - Are numbers real?

Common Problems with Questions

- Merely information retrieval; question does not require creating data or constructing new understandings
- Begs the question
- Leading
- Too generic
- Too narrow and specific
- Not intriguing

Revising Questions

1. Topic: Relationships
 - a. Question: Where do our marriage questions come from? (info retrieval)
 - b. Revision: What makes a good relationship?
2. Topic: Civil Rights
 - a. Question: How did we win the fight for civil rights? (begs the question)
 - b. Revision: What are basic human rights and how can they be secured and protected?
3. Topic: Survival
 - a. Question: Why is it bad that animals are going extinct? (leading)
 - b. Revision: Who survives?
4. Topic: Identity
 - a. Question: Who am I? (generic)
 - b. Revision: Where do I belong? What shapes our view of the world?